



Preparing for What Nature Throws Our Way

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Throughout our state's history, the extremes of our weather have been a preoccupation of Texans everywhere. If friends are talking about the wicked slap of an Arctic front—a fast-moving “norther”—they soon agree that any bitter cold is vastly superior to the Texas heat in August.

Texans have always been optimistic, even about events that threaten agriculture, the indispensable industry that carried Texas into modern times. Some early Texans even found an upside to periodic drought conditions.

O. M. Addison wrote his brother from Fort Bend County in 1848 that a “great benefit of the drought is dry roads; this is more favorable on me than the farmers.

“You have no idea of the state of the roads in wet weather; and if you remain in ignorance on this point, you will lose nothing.”

Agriculture remains a vital part of the Texas economy today. So rain is always a welcome blessing here. But in the vastness of our state, excess precipitation is also a danger.

This spring, 10 people were killed in a storm that hit Eagle Pass. In late March, the biggest tornado outbreak in nearly 60 years walloped the Panhandle, particularly Donley, Gray, Hemphill and Lipscomb counties.

Now the focus is shifting to the Gulf Coast. The official 2007 hurricane season began this month, with scientists from the National Weather Service again predicting a potentially active year.

Of course, the same experts made similar predictions for last summer that proved to be ... overblown. An El Nino wind pattern suppressed hurricane formations in the Atlantic late in the season.

But we all learned a lesson in 2005. Coastal residents in Gulf Coast states suffered through Katrina, Rita and Wilma, with significant human costs and loss of lives, and billions in damages.

Texans respect the power of nature. We are confident we can handle whatever is thrown at us, and we usually do. But as our state grows and develops, we've learned there is no substitute for planning, both by government and by individuals.

There are some events that we'll never be completely ready for. One of the worst natural disasters in American history occurred on Sept. 8, 1900 when a hurricane hit Galveston. As many as 8,000 Texans perished, many trapped by severe flooding.

Hurricane dangers aren't limited to the coast. In 1979, Tropical Storm Claudette dumped 45 inches of rain near Alvin, Texas. Twenty-two years later, 36 inches of rain fell in Harris County in the wake of Tropical Storm Allison.

Texas now benefits from committed emergency management staff at the local and state levels. With their federal counterparts, they learned from the 2005 hurricanes. Future storms will pose new challenges, but recent lessons will be applied in the years to come.

Part of their official job is making certain we are all prepared individually for natural disasters. The government is playing an increasing role in emergency management, but there is no substitute for individual preparation.

Actions can be as simple as stocking an “emergency kit” in your car. Consider including everything from vital prescription medicines, important documents you would need if displaced [such as copies of insurance policies, proof of residency, maps and ID cards], cash, special supplies for babies, seniors and pets, personal products and non-perishable food, water and blankets. If appropriate, look into purchasing flood insurance.

The federal government spent more than \$200 billion recovering from the 2005 hurricanes. Every year, the government spends millions more in Texas on flood control, emergency responder preparedness and training, storm tracking, rebuilding coastlines and other assistance.

But, as Texans have always known, there is no substitute for our own careful, sound preparation and planning. Government effort is important. But personal responsibility will always be part of our Texas heritage.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column